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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 000428

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/26/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: WANTED: IMPROVED RELATIONS, BUT WITH A NEW
AMBASSADOR?

REF: LA PAZ 408

Classified By: Acting EcoPol Chief Joe Relk for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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Summary
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¶1. (SBU) The Bolivian government has reacted negatively to news that the Ambassador had a public meeting with eastern lowland indigenous leaders, arguing that it was interference in Bolivia's domestic affairs and proof that the USG is conspiring against the Morales administration (reftel.) While referring to the event, Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca announced that the Bolivian government wanted to "re-vamp" relations with the United States but at the same time criticized the Ambassador, sidestepping a question about whether the government would seek his expulsion. Presidency Minister Juan Ramon Quintana re-iterated the government's litany of charges against the Ambassador and USAID with a new allegation that that the Embassy violated the Vienna Convention by visiting opposition leaders. Quintana stated he would travel to the United States to provide the government's "proof" to U.S. Congressional representatives. Meanwhile, the government began re-releasing in Spanish articles by U.S. authors sympathetic to the Bolivian government's position.

¶2. (C) The government's extreme reaction to the Ambassador's meeting with indigenous leaders shows sensitivity to its self-assumed role as champion for indigenous Bolivians. The government routinely attempts to marginalize indigenous groups that do not support it, in this case by linking them to the USG. The threat to expel the Ambassador at this time is most likely a hollow one (though we cannot rule it out). The topic is supposedly on the cabinet's agenda for February 27. The Morales administration needs the Ambassador and USAID as distractions for the myriad problems facing the country. End Summary.

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Meeting with Indigenous Sparks Negative Reactions

13. (C) The Bolivian government has reacted negatively to a February 21 meeting among Ambassador Goldberg, Embassy Public Affairs and EcoPol sections, and eastern lowland indigenous leaders (reftel). The government used photos taken at the meeting (press was invited to attend by the Embassy) as "evidence" of conspiracy and interference. Minister of Presidency Juan Ramon Quintana has questioned why the Ambassador would meet with such "unrepresentative" civic leaders. A mistaken news article (soon to be corrected by an Embassy press release) added that Ambassador Goldberg was present at a ceremony in which indigenous leaders were given copies of the Santa Cruz autonomy declaration translated into seven indigenous languages. (Note: In fact, the Ambassador was at that time presenting a donation to a special victims unit of the District Attorney's office. The Santa Cruz autonomy declaration was translated into multiple indigenous languages when a number of indigenous leaders complained that the MAS-drafted constitution was not translated into any indigenous language -- a fact which may have piqued MAS ire. End Note.)

The Ministers Speak Out

14. (U) Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca announced during a press conference that the Bolivian government wanted to "re-vamp" relations with the United States while at the same time criticizing the Ambassador. Choquehuanca reiterated the oft-stated comment that the relationship needs to be based on

"transparency and not interference." Responding to a question on whether the Ambassador should be replaced, the Foreign Minister left the option open, stating "we must see how we address this issue." Choquehuanca then appeared to indicate he had convoked the Ambassador yet again for a meeting with the vice-foreign minister on February 26. (Note: The Ambassador and vice-foreign minister Hugo Fernandez did meet on February 26, but for lunch at the Ambassador's residence at the invitation of the Ambassador. A readout will be available septel. End Note).

15. (U) At the same press conference, Presidency Minister Juan Ramon Quintana embellished upon the foreign minister's statements. Quintana stated the "re-launching" of relations "will be a result of a wide discussion that the government will hold internally, in addition it is necessary to discuss this with the United States government." Quintana claimed that the Ambassador "heads the opposition" and that USAID plays a nefarious "political role" in Bolivia. He explained the government would provide "a detailed description" of the "ties between USAID and NGOs designed to undermine the legitimacy of the government, directed at dividing (social sector) organizations to turn them against the government."

16. (SBU) Quintana said the Bolivian government "made the decision to denounce (U.S. conspiracy) domestically and internationally." Quintana added that he would travel to the United States to meet with "U.S. Congress members and provide the proof the government has (against the U.S. Mission in La Paz) with respect to the anti-democratic intervention that violates the Vienna Convention and which converts assistance into a political tool."

The Smokeless Gun?

17. (SBU) Government news agency ABI has begun translating and printing articles written by U.S. authors who agree with the Bolivian government's charges against the USG. On February 25, ABI published an article by Mark Weisbrot of the Center for Economic and Policy Research titled "Is Washington Undermining Democracy in Bolivia?" On February 26, ABI published Benjamin Dangl's article "Undermining Bolivia" that

originally appeared in U.S. magazine "The Progressive."
(Comment: The Morales administration appears to view these
articles as "proof" that their accusations are valid. End
Comment).

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Comment
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18. (C) The Morales administration is likely using this newest so-called scandal to distract attention from the failure of talks with prefects and the recent allegations that the government has used police forces to spy on the opposition. The government's arguments that the Embassy and USAID have somehow violated the Vienna Convention indicate that they either do not understand the convention or choose not to understand it. Meeting with opposition figures and dissidents has never been a violation of the convention. Diplomats meet routinely with members of their host government's opposition, including the Bolivian Ambassador in the United States. Minister Quintana may wish to claim that the U.S. mission has violated the Vienna Convention to members of the U.S. Congress, but has not explained why he failed to provide his "proof" during CODEL Engel's February 19 meeting with President Morales, which he attended.

19. (C) Morales has a cabinet meeting planned for February 27. The Ambassador's status in Bolivia is supposedly on the agenda. We do not expect Morales to declare the Ambassador persona-non-grata because it would imply actions and reactions that the Bolivian government is not likely prepared

for at this time. Furthermore, the Morales administration uses the Ambassador and USAID as distractions for the litany of problems facing the country. Morales might ask that the USG voluntarily remove the Ambassador, as his ministers have suggested publicly. Either government officials do not understand that such a request carries no weight diplomatically or, perhaps, they understand this but are more interested in responding publicly to a statement of their own making.

110. (C) The Bolivian government's extreme reaction to a public and low-key meeting with indigenous leaders highlights a potential chink in Evo's armor: his popularity with Bolivia's indigenous and his credibility as their leader. Evo's attempts to consolidate power and extend his reign are increasingly viewed askance by indigenous leaders, a number of whom have told embassies that Evo's goals appear to them to be increasingly socialist rather than indigenist, a trend that worries them. Indigenous leaders also complain that, despite his indigenist rhetoric, Evo has chosen to surround himself with old-school leftists, with very few prominent indigenous leaders in the MAS leadership (Foreign Minister Choquehuanca and Justice Minister Celima Torico are the only two clearly indigenous members of Evo's 16-member cabinet). Beyond merely ignoring or not including indigenous leaders, Evo and the MAS have taken active steps to marginalize and exclude those indigenous leaders who do not fully and vocally support the MAS. The MAS has "cloned" or created replacement civic groups, including indigenous groups, to replace and isolate uncooperative groups. End Comment.
GOLDBERG